

Relational Accountability in the Character and Culture of Mountain States Mennonite Conference

Summary

Introduction

- Every organizational structure, by choice or default, develops patterns of behavior that evolve into a particular culture.
- We believe that a culture of relational accountability will best serve the current identity and historic ethos of congregations in the Rocky Mountain region.
- Organizational identity is closely tied to issues of authority and accountability.
- Jesus primarily called people to accountability based on his relationship with God and others.
- There is a distinction between relational authority that has integrity and authoritarianism that results from the inappropriate use of power in relationships.
- Relational accountability can have authoritative and identity-forming dimensions in the proposed Mountain States Mennonite Conference.

Authority, Accountability and Identity

- Accountability does not enjoy popular acceptance in our culture at large unless it is personally defined and controlled.
- Over time, identity is formed by that to which we give authority and to which we are willing to be accountable.
- Leaders who wish to call communities to accountability under a commonly interpreted authority will work with various forms of relational accountability.
- Example: Mennonite World Conference (MWC) previously operating on a relational level stressing “koinonia” is discerning whether they might move from simply an “association” or “affiliation” toward a “communion” of national conferences. Such a movement seeks a deeper level of relationship reflecting a more particular identity.

Christ-Like Authority and Accountability

- Jesus’ identity (and consequently, his authority) grew out of his relationship with God. Jesus extended wholeness as a vehicle of God’s desire for healing, wholeness and relationship. (John 15:9-10;14-15)
- Jesus rebukes attempts to gain favor and authority by proximity (how close you are to the top), but rather, re-defines greatness in terms of relational position as “*servant*” and “*slave.*” (Matthew 20:20-28)
- Throughout his ministry, Jesus’ identity unfolded as his authority continually flowed out of his accountable relationship with God.
- The danger often associated with hierarchical accountability is “authoritarianism.” Jesus ministered not primarily from the authority of his position as Rabbi – but from relationship.
- Conversely, the danger often associated with relational accountability is that it lacks sufficient authority. Within the context of relationship, Jesus did not shy away from calling people to righteousness.
- By living out of a strong, centered relationship with God, Jesus was still able to avoid the opposing pitfalls of being authoritarian on one hand and “wimpy” on the other.

Relational Authority versus Authoritarianism

- We can create a pattern (and ultimately a culture) of relationships that bind us to accountable prayer, community discernment, and decision-making without “lording it over” one another.
 1. An important tenet of non-authoritarian relational accountability is respect for the other. This respect does not necessarily indicate agreement. We can disagree with another person or group without denigrating their ability to enter into conversation and make judgments. Jesus’ approach to dealing with enemies was to draw them **into** a relationship through agape love rather than drive them out of relationship.
 2. Another way in which we can extend respect to another, is to release them to the providence of God. Too often, questions of conference membership have turned into ultimate questions of salvation based on correct theology. Instead of trying to “convert” the other to our opinion, by clearly stating our perspectives and opinions, and trusting the Holy Spirit to work through our openness to speak clearly and listen carefully, we allow God to invite conversion. What we are responsible to do is remain in covenanted conversation and prayer with one another. There are points at which a congregation may move beyond the bounds of accepted life and faith within a particular conference. The manner in which a conference would deal with such an eventuality is through the process of the gathered community.
 3. Finally, we may avoid authoritarianism by believing that all of us have a part of the revelation of God to the Christian community. We all possess something of value.
- Simply put, a single congregation needs the discernment of others - spoken in a context of the Christian community - in order to live a faithful life

Relational Accountability Reflected in the Proposed Mountain States Mennonite Conference

- In Mountain States Mennonite Conference we will work at building relational authority and accountability by:
 1. Seeking to create a regular forum for discussion and discernment called “Faith and Life Forums
 2. Heightening relationships in the area of generating and supporting mission. By encouraging and facilitating “passion driven” ministries we will bring into contact who are similarly engaged in God’s work in the world.
 3. Nurturing our conversation with our historic faith. Along with scripture, documents like our Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective become significant relational partners as we discern our faith and life together.
 4. Engaging in the relational act of prayer. Organized prayer would be conducted coterminous with all of our major conference meetings.
 5. Staffing that understands and exercises a relational style of leadership.

Conclusion

To begin this conference, we choose neither the approach of a thoroughly defined theological litmus test nor a loosely structured federation where each congregation “minds its own business.” God has already placed various portions of wisdom and insight into the lives of the churches who are coming together to form this conference. The challenge will be to see if we can uncover the wisdom that God has placed in our midst and the future that God is dreaming for us. To foster Christian maturity, we know that a disciplined approach to corporate spirituality – both at the congregational and conference level – are as essential as spiritual disciplines in the lives of individual Christians. Only by being accountable to the authority of God’s will together, revealed through our corporate gatherings, will we be able to fully form and express an impassioned Anabaptist Christian identity.